

# 1

A loud screech resounded in the air as the metro reached the station.

“Barcelona!”

“Barcelona!”

A voice announced through the loudspeaker.

“The terminus!”

Swarms of passengers pushed through the opening doors and flooded the platform.

“Don’t get off!” a shrill cry rose from the crowd. Facing one of the metro doors, an old man was kicking passengers with his hands and cane, and with all his might trying to push them back inside.

“They’re lying to you, this is not Barcelona”, he shouted on the top of his voice. “This is hell!”

“Go away, crazy man!” an angry voice broke from the small crowd inside, who, growing impatient, started to violently push back until the man fell to the ground.

“No! No!” one of the passengers cried in indignation and rushed towards the old man who was then lying helplessly on his backside, still mumbling some words:

“M’cane .... mh...cane.”

The passenger, sturdy and young, bent over the wretched man and stretched out his hand to help him stand. At this gesture, the latter’s eyes bulged out in a horrible fish-like stare, and in his attempt to move backward, he made a convulsive movement with his head, followed by a deep, terrifying growl.

“It’s okay, Uncle Saleh, I’m not gonna hurt you,” the passenger reassured him with a soothing tone. “I’m Ahmed,” he added as he crouched next to him.

The old man’s black eyes narrowed again; his head lolled forward and his mouth twisted round, producing a grunting sound:

“Ugh.... Ugh.... Ugh.”

“Yes, Ahmed, your friend, remember?!”

“Ah..med.... Ahmed,” he repeated and shook his head in surrender. “M’cane... my cane.”

Ahmed looked around. The station was almost empty except for a conductor in a blue uniform, who got off the metro, and who, after leaning forward, started pouring water right from a plastic bottle over his head. Ahmed suddenly became aware of the stifling heat and felt his wet t-shirt sticking to his back. He mechanically wiped his perspiring forehead with his bare hands, then continued to look around until his eyes fell on the old wooden cane lying on the ground, on his left side. He picked it up, helped Saleh stand on his feet, and walked him to a cemented bench in the platform where they sat together, side by side; one with his disheveled grey hair, brown wrinkled face, and tattered clothes; the other with his well- parted brown hair, smooth face, clear brown eyes, and blue t-shirt and jeans. Silent, they both looked straight ahead at the black graffiti on the side of the unmoving and empty metro facing them. ‘Free the Tunisian People,’ it read. Just above, an electronic sign, cracked on the corner, flashed the orange words, ‘Barcelona Square.’

“It’s not Barcelona, you know,” said Saleh, squinting his eyes.

Ahmed nodded and smiled in return.

“Then, why do they call it so?”

“I don’t know,” he replied apologetically.

“It’s hell, I’m telling you, I’ve seen it with my own...”, he let the sentence tumble away, and seemed to sink in deep thought as he frowned and looked ahead.

The metro started moving again, with the sign now reading, ‘Out of Service’.

“Say, Uncle Saleh, how about we go grab a coffee or something to eat?”, suggested Ahmed, intending to cheer him up.

"I can't eat ... not before sunset," he said sheepishly, lowering his head. "It's Ramadan.... I don't wanna go to hell --" he abruptly stopped his reflection, then let out a high-pitched guffaw. Ahmed stood, confused; the red color of his cheeks scattered itself over his pale sweaty face.

"What is it, Uncle Saleh?", he muttered in a low voice.

"But I'm already in h--" was Saleh's response before he broke off in a fit of laughter. A little laugh slipped from Ahmed's mouth as well as he sat down again, watching his old friend.

"Are you coming?" he asked, almost imploring, when Saleh calmed down.

"I can't, I have to guard this place, you know." So saying, Saleh bent to pick up his cane, when Ahmed grabbed his aged brown arm and said, "but, you can't..." Not knowing what to say, Ahmed shifted in his place and stared at the aged arm covered with thick grey hair, dust, and sweat; he then proceeded, with a soft friendly tone, "you have to promise me not to approach the metro, or the passengers coming out of it." Saleh nodded his head eagerly, like a child.

"Uncle Saleh!" a voice came from behind. Saleh and Ahmed looked around, and saw a metro guard approaching them. Saleh giggled at the sight of the man and started waving at him.

"Aziz, Aziz!" he cried in excitement.

"How're you man?!" exclaimed the guard in a boisterous tone.

"Aziz, you're right on time," said Ahmed as he stood and shook hands with the guard. "Could you keep an eye on him?"

"Sure! I'm gonna be here for some time anyway. I just started my shift."

"Thanks, Aziz!"

Ahmed then handed Saleh the cane and patted his shoulders.

"Good bye, Ahmed," Saleh said, smiling and holding his cane tight.

Ahmed smiled back, and gave the old man a compassionate look before turning his back and heading to the exit. As he walked through the station, he heard the sound of a metro rumbling up to the platform and the voice of Uncle Saleh shouting, “Welcome to Hell!”

Once outside, Ahmed crossed the square with steady heavy steps, feeling the flat space under his feet. It is the same square where he walked with his parents as a child, where he hung out with his friends as a teenager, and where he stood calling for the fall of the regime two years ago.

He listened to the echo of his footsteps growing louder in his head. Suddenly, he saw the policemen chasing him around in the square and felt the odor of tear gas tingling his nostrils. Two bodies on the ground appeared to him from behind the white fumes: it was his neighbor Zineb and her daughter Miriam, both lying in blood, their heads hanging backward and their dark eyes wide open. The husband, Uncle Saleh, knelt by their side, raising his bloody arms in the air; his shrill scream mixed with the sound of gunshots and filled the square. The sound of a car horn jolted Ahmed out of his memories. Glancing back, he saw the flat space bathing in blazing sunlight and few people wandering around; he then shook his head and crossed the street hurriedly, leaving behind Barcelona Square and its irrevocable ugliness hanging in the air.

From *Gamal Abdel Nasser* to *Charle de Gaulle*, Ahmed walked under the shade of the old French buildings and trees lining the streets, unaware of his surroundings. Nothing seemed to catch his attention; not the jostling of pedestrians around him, nor the shouts of streets vendors who invaded the pavements; not even the trash that tumbled from one of the balconies bulging from the buildings. Not long ago, he used to make an effort to conceal his disdain at this sight, and struggled to check himself not to curse people out loud for what they have done to the city. But now, all the scenes and sounds in the streets floated in his mind, as if from another world. Until he reached the café by the corner of his neighborhood, all he thought about was the heat inflaming his head.

Shoving through a yellow rubber curtain hanging under the sign which read “Café El Teatro”, Ahmed stormed into the place and flung himself into the first chair he encountered. The café was a big rectangular room with yellow peeling walls and a beige ceiling from which three chandeliers were suspended. Round tables and chairs were scattered on the right side of the room, their dark wood shimmered under the soft light of the chandeliers. A wide wooden counter stretched along the left side, and in the back corner stood a pastry vitrine. Behind the counter, a waiter stooped over a large silver espresso machine, cleaning it. Above him, open shelves displayed glassware, white porcelain cups, and a row of copper Turkish coffee pots. In the back of the room, Mr. Jilani, the owner of the café, was dozing in an armchair, while his wife, Jamila, who sat in a table near him, seemed busy wiping the mouth and hands of her grandson, Adam. Behind them a white air-conditioning unit jutted out of the back wall, emitting whirring gusts of cool air.

At the noise Ahmed made in entering, Mr. Jilani opened his eyes, startled; he raised himself in his chair and looked towards the door.

“Ahmed!” he said, stretching his neck forward and looking in the direction of the entrance, “are you okay?”

“Yes, yes!” the latter answered as he stood up and crossed the room, dragging his feet, and loudly breathing the cold air. After the greeting, he bent and kissed them on the forehead, then patted Adam’s head.

“How’re you buddy!?” he asked in a friendly tone.

“Good!” the boy flushed in delight before jumping from his chair and running towards the counter.

“Tell me, how was your first day at grad school?” asked Mr. Jilani in a fatherly manner.

“Well, today I learned that I’m a fool ... because I was the only one who showed up to school... even the professor wasn’t there!”

“You’re no fool ... if there’s someone who is gonna make it in agreg this year, it’s gonna be you, I’m telling you!” he said, reassuredly. “And you will be one the best history professors in Tunis, just like your parents!” he added, with marked emphasis.

“You will make us proud,” said Jamila, giving him a benevolent smile and a tap on the back.

Ahmed opened his mouth as if to speak, but stopped as he felt a lump burning in his throat. Just then Adam ran back to his grandmother and started clasping the end of her *jebba*.

“*Mami, Mami*, can I have another *mille-feuille*?” he asked, leaning his chest against her knees and widening his large hazel eyes.

“But you just had one... you’re gonna ruin your dinner,” she responded, raising her eyes and eyebrows.

Without a word, Adam rested his elbows against her knees and, letting out a sigh, seized his head between his hands.

“You little devil!” Mr. Jilani muttered jocularly to his grandson as he maneuvered himself to his feet. “Jamila, let him have another one!” he protested mildly.

His wife looked at him for a moment, rather reproachfully, then nodded her head in assent. Adam’s face lit up in a wide grin as he jumped next to his grandfather.

“Ahmed, wanna eat something?” asked Mr. Jilani.

“No, Uncle Jilani, I don’t feel like—“

“How about I fix you a sandwich?” Jamila interrupted.

“No, thanks *ta ta*, I’m not hungry, really!”

“How about a drink? Coffee? Tea? Lemonade” suggested Mr. Jilani.

“Okay, a lemonade.”

Leaning his back further against the chair and stretching out his legs, Ahmed stared at Adam and his grandparents, as they stood near the vitrine. Seeing the small thin boy munching the *mille-feuille* reminded him of himself when he was a child. He used to come to the café with his father every Sunday, following their morning walk. After holding his father’s gigantic hand all around the streets of Tunis, he would finally let it go as they stepped into El Teatro and start running around between human and table legs, avoiding the patting hands that emerged from all sides. And whenever a pair of these hands caught him, he would be lifted over some lap and passed around the table to be showered with kisses and immersed in smokers’ breath. Only men sat in the café back then; all were familiar faces from his neighborhood or the surrounding ones. In his child’s mind, however, they made up two groups. The first was that of the old men who usually sat together reading their newspapers quietly and smoking cigarettes or pipes; when they talked, it was with an awe-inspiring composure. Their heavy white mustaches and deep expressive eyes only added to the wisdom he perceived in their faces. The second group was made up of all those who didn’t have white mustaches, in other words, the younger ones. Those would sit under clouds of white smoke suspended over their heads, as they chewed frantically on their cigarettes and played cards. From time to time, one of them would start shouting and thumping down on the table, in protest. Every time this happened, he, together with the table, would bounce up and down under the Arabic curses, flying in the air. Once fatigue started to creep into his legs, and boredom into his mind, he would drag himself to the counter where his father always stood, sipping a Turkish coffee and talking with his two friends, Jilani and Saleh, who were their neighbors as well, both living above their apartment. His father, Jilani and Saleh, took turns at buying him *mille-feuilles*

each time he joined them. After the death of his parents, Jilani and Saleh took turns at filling the place of his father. They treated him like a son.

Looking at Jilani, Ahmed realized that he didn't change much. He was still stout and tallish, with a prominent bald forehead. Only now, he joined the ranks of the wise men, for his mustache had turned white, and his clear brown eyes had sunken deeper in his head, between the lines of wrinkles. His wife, on the other hand, seemed more frail; her face had grown very haggard and lined, her green eyes flaccid and dull. She was nothing like the fresh-looking and energetic neighbor he knew as a child. Back then, she used to give him sweets whenever he and his mother ran into her on their way to the market. Over the last few years, he rarely saw her in the neighborhood. But, she would still knock on his door to bring him sweets and food.

When Jamila and Adam left, Jilani came back with a lemonade and a cup of coffee in his hands.

"Here you go Mr. Ahmed!" he said gaily as he put the glass of lemonade on the table. "By the way, you'll break the Iftar with us today. Okay!?" he added as he retreated to his chair.

Ahmed couldn't help laughing aloud. "What Iftar are we gonna break? We don't fast!" Jilani joined in the laugh, then said, "well, your '*ta ta* Jamila' does, and she's gonna cook a feast anyway. So you'd better come!"

"Thanks Uncle Jilani, but I really can't. I'm meeting the new roommate today; he's coming around that time."

"Just bring him along. The more, the merrier!"

"No, let's leave it for some other time. Maybe when I get to know him better."

"Who is he anyway?" he asked with a curious air of concern, inclining his head in Ahmed's direction.



“I don’t know much about him, except that he comes from Kerkennah, and that he has been looking for a place for quite some time. My aunt knows his family and called me asking if I could help, so I told her that I was looking for a third roommate ..... I think he’s a graduate history student too, but I’m not sure if he’s in Manouba as well.”

Jilani listened to Ahmed intently as he sipped his coffee. “I hope he turns out to be a good guy!” He took a thoughtful sip of coffee, then went on, “did I tell you how I came to know your father?”

Ahmed nodded a yes in return; yet the nod didn’t --and never did before -- deter Jilani from telling the story one more time: “I met Ramzi on the train going from Sfax to Tunis. We were recent high school graduates and were about to start university. It was the first time anyone of us left his hometown. We talked and talked for hours as if we had been best friends since childhood. And halfway to Tunis, we decided to become roommates. Then, when we started university, we met Saleh and he soon became the third roommate. By the end of that year, we became best friends, and until we graduated, we remained roommates.”

Ahmed’s face broke into a wide smile that was soon wiped out as Ahmed seemed to remember something. “Talking about Uncle Saleh, he’s still in the station,” he said in a doleful tone. “I tried to bring him, but he wouldn’t come.”

Trying to conceal his own dejection, Jilani leaned towards Ahmed and gave him a pat on the back, then said, “don’t worry about him, I will bring him after I close the café.”

“Each time I see him in that damn station, I can’t believe he’s the same Uncle Saleh I knew.”

“Me neither,” answered Jilani with a deep sigh. “Back at college, he was known as the philosopher of the *UGET*. Your father and myself were a bit emotional and impulsive back then,

but he was the most rational among us. You see son ..... you see what this country does to rational people; it either kills them or turns them crazy.”

They fell silent for a moment, Jilani, rigid in his chair and looking straight ahead, and Ahmed, staring at the glass of lemonade on the table.

“You know,” Jilani suddenly continued, “when I travelled one summer with your dad and Saleh to Belgium to do some research, we were offered an opportunity to stay there, and continue our studies, but we chose to come back.”

“Why?”

“Because we were fools!” was Jilani’s reply before they both broke into a loud laughter.

“We came back because we thought that we needed to be here.... you know, the country was going downhill back then. Bourguiba was going crazy. He declared himself president for life, then started telling people that he was ‘the Supreme Combatant’. So we joined the leftist opposition, thinking that we could improve things. But then that scoundrel, Ben Ali, came to power, and you know the rest.”

“But Ben Ali is gone now. Maybe things will get —”

“No, nothing will change in this country, I’m telling you. Not in ten years. Not in a million years! Who’s gonna change things? Those teachers who never show up to class and who are now filling the streets demanding raises? Or those policemen who are still living on bribes? Or the citizens who walk in the roads and throw trash on the sidewalks? Or those politicians who shift left and right depending on their own interests? Or even better, those bearded scoundrels ruling the country now? Those? Haw, Haw, those are gonna drag us a hundred years back. At least Bourguiba tried to educate his people and free them from religion. When he was president, he told people in one of his speeches not to fast because they needed to work and get along with their daily

lives. All those restaurants and cafes in L'avenue that you see closed today used to remain open during Ramadan. Now, they are telling us to close windows and put curtains if 'we wish to open our cafes and restaurants in the holy month'. Look at us, sitting in this dark hole like rats, with that horrendous curtain on the door."

At this tirade, Ahmed seemed rather disconcerted, but then retired under the cover of a humorous remark: "At least the curtains match the color of the sign!"

A soft mocking laugh was Jilani's reply.

"By the way, Uncle Jilani, when I was in the metro today, I heard passengers talking about some café that was attacked by a mob of bearded men who threatened the owner with knives and ordered him to close the place."

"And he did?" cried Jilani abruptly, his face wrinkling with rage.

"Of course he did! .... Wouldn't you have done the same?"

"I..." Jilani stopped with a profound look. His voice then dropped into a mumble. "Barbarians!"